

Title: Inspiring Persistence: Building theme-based units to engage and challenge first-year composition students

Presenter: Mary Alexander, Kaua'i Community College

Abstract:

One of the biggest challenges I face in my ENG 100 classes is engaging students. In the past, no matter how hard I worked to choose current, real-world, Hawaii-relevant topics, most of my efforts fell short. These problems appeared to be compounded with the advent of the UHCC acceleration mandate, as more first-year composition students would be entering our classes with weaker reading and writing skills.

Last Fall, inspired by a unit from the Baltimore CC ALP program shared with me by Windward CC's Jenny Webster, I tried teaching first-year composition by creating a theme-based unit comprised of a diverse collection of instructor-selected texts, from classic peer-reviewed articles to rap poetry, all centered around one or more guiding questions. Not only did this method interest students, it increased students' opportunities to write from sources from semester start, practice critical reading comprehension skills, and practice writing skills in low-stakes ways; modeled real-world research and non-genre-specific response; eliminated textbook cost; and engaged students in such a way that many --including ALP students--chose to rise to the challenge. In this presentation, I will share my experience building a successful theme-based unit to inspire students to persist and succeed.

Keywords: Readings, Research, Information Sources

Related Hallmarks:

#1 (choosing course readings with a focus on expository texts)

#4 (modelling diverse kinds of research and requiring students to learn to integrate and cite it from semester start)

#5 (helping students read texts and make use of a variety of sources in expressing their ideas)

Speaking Notes:

Why:

- UHCC Acceleration Initiative
- Desperation
- Dr. Manu Meyer challenge: to mentor and guide students through current, challenging, and critically important topics... "I say if you know everything's that's going to happen in a class, then that's a very bad class."

Experience Varying a Unit:

- Localizing and shaping the unit on Language

I saw the benefits included:

- Increased opportunities to write from sources from semester start
- Increased opportunities to practice critical reading comprehension
- Increased opportunities to write in low-stakes ways
- Ability to model real-world research by assembling a diverse collection of texts
- Minimized or eliminated textbook cost

- Engaged students--especially local students and those often most marginalized

First time Creating Such a Unit from Scratch

- Topic: Looking for something high-interest, important, on a topic that would engage Hawaii students and on which they would feel a certain amount of authority
- Framing the question: seeking to be unbiased, so backed up and started students thinking about cultural appropriation
- Looked for high-interest texts coming from different angles, voices, and sources; incredible opportunity to meet several of the authors who were on Kauai to attend the Assn. for Social Anthropology in Oceania conference!
- “Moana” is a new topic, so the texts assembled reflected its currency and presented real-world learning opportunities for students:
 - Dates--pre-film hype and indigenous preparation for attack vs. post-release reviews
 - A chance to look at authorship, credentials, co-option, insiders/outsideers
 - Who knew that Facebook would play an important role in activist research!
 - Popular sources include a lot of photo evidence--another good model
 - Primary vs. secondary sources (primary including the film and students’ lives and experiences)
 - Lots of different citing methods were needed
- Sample Unit [Handout](#)

